

The Most Beautiful
MIHRAB



WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY
LUQMAN NAGY



DARUSSALAM
GLOBAL LEADER IN ISLAMIC BOOKS

Introduction

Even five hundred years after the loss of Al-Andalus (Islamic Spain) to the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, the sad event is still remembered by Muslims the world over. The cultural legacy of the eight hundred years of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula is a strong one. Christian, Jewish and Muslim poets, historians, scientists and artists have all left us written records of this period in history when multi-cultural tolerance permitted a flowering of civilization that has rarely been surpassed.

In Cordoba, the illustrious capital city of the Caliphate of Al-Andalus, Christians, Jews and Muslims lived as tolerant neighbours. Indeed, it was in such a tolerant environment that Islamic culture was so readily transmitted to the Christians and Jews of Western Europe.

The Cordoba of a thousand years ago was a centre of Islamic culture and scientific learning. Scholars from both Europe and Islamic lands met in the city's *madrasahs* and universities where Arabic was the unifying language.

Cordoba's 'golden age' came during the time of the caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III (929-961 CE) and continued during the reign of his son, Al-Hakam II (961-976 CE). Al-Hakam's reign was a prosperous and stable one. The caliph welcomed scholars from far and wide to his court, thus making Cordoba a truly

international metropolis. Al-Hakam II himself was learned and a great bibliophile - a lover and collector of books. He, not surprisingly, sent his agents to all major cities of the Islamic and Christian worlds to purchase books for his royal library. He soon had one of the largest libraries of the time: a collection of some 400,000 volumes to which even the public had access.

Al-Hakam also assembled an international team of artists and architects to help him beautify his capital city, and, in particular, the Great Friday Mosque. This book describes the unique story of Muslim-Christian co-operation that resulted in the construction of 'the most beautiful *mihrab* in the world'. That this co-operation occurred a thousand years ago should remind Muslims today of our ancestors' exemplary behaviour when *convivencia* - the unique coexistence among the Muslims, Christians, and Jews of Al-Andalus which led to a culture of tolerance and immense scholarship - was a reality and an opportunity at making *da'wah* (i.e. 'Invitation to Islam') was rarely missed.

To all readers of this work, my warmest salaams.

Luqman Nagy
Dhahran, Saudi Arabia
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After the death of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) in Madinah in 632 CE, the Islamic Empire grew at an astonishing speed. Muslims moved out of Arabia and spread their religion, Al-Islam, to all peoples – even those living as far away as Central Asia and North Africa.

In northwest Africa (in present-day Morocco) most of the local people – the Berbers – had become Muslims. In 711 CE, the famous Berber commander, Tariq ibn Ziyad, led his army across the stretch of water separating North Africa from Christian Spain in Europe and within a few short years, most of Spain had become part of the Islamic world. The small mountain, near the site where Tariq entered southern Spain, is still known as ‘Tariq’s Mountain’, or Gibraltar (from the Arabic *Jabal Tariq*).

Many Spanish cities and towns both large and small, were now controlled by Muslims. As more and more Christians chose to live and worship as Muslims, the need for mosques increased all over the country. The beautiful city of Cordoba soon became the capital of Muslim Spain and the first large mosque was built there.



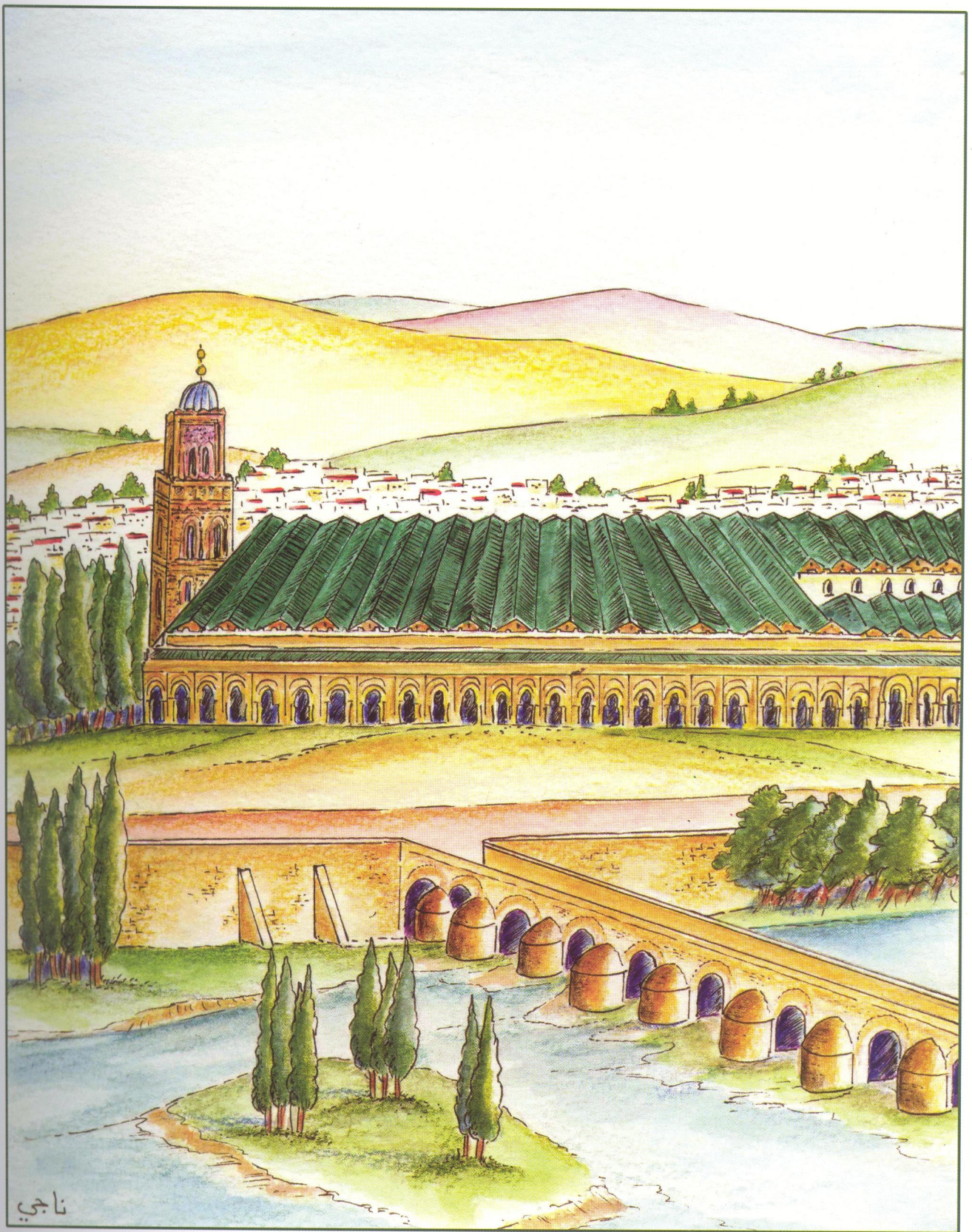
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‘**A**bd al-Rahman I was a prince living in the Umayyad capital of Damascus in Syria. When a rival family, the ‘Abbasids, took control of the Islamic Empire in 750 CE and eventually began to rule from Baghdad, ‘Abd al-Rahman I travelled west to Spain for safety. In Cordoba, he established the Umayyad dynasty of Spanish rulers in 756 CE.

Cordoba, now the capital city of Muslim Spain, grew in importance. By the 10th century CE, the population of the city had reached almost half a million. The city had hundreds of mosques, libraries and public baths. Even the city’s streets were lit by oil lamps at night. Cordoba was truly the most civilized city in the known world rivaling Constantinople and Baghdad in the East.

At the centre of this magnificent city was the Great Friday Mosque, built not far from the banks of the ‘Great River’ or *Al-Wadi al-Kabir* (Guadalquivir River). Begun in 785 CE by ‘Abd al-Rahman I, the mosque was enlarged over a period of more than two hundred years by later Spanish Umayyad rulers. It was built in memory of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus which had been constructed by the relatives of ‘Abd al-Rahman I.

Five times a day, the muezzin would climb the tall four-sided minaret and call all Muslims to *salah* (prayer) and *falah* (success).



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